Mentalités and events

MENTALITÉS AND EVENTS: HISTORICIZING INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS

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Abstract:	

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In his recent paper, Professor Mutch (2018) sets out a new, thought-provoking framework for theorizing societal logics, building upon the insights of cultural historians. He proposes that "they are each derived from some aspect of the relations between people and their social and natural worlds, as demonstrated through the work of historians to be enduring features of human existence" (247). Mutch argues that the specificities of practices may vary across time and place, but that the same nine societal logics remain; defined by "perennial features of our embodied relationship with the world" (247). We disagree. Although we are aligned with Mutch in our enthusiasm about the historical turn in institutionalism (Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014; Suddaby, Foster, & Mills, 2014), we take a very different set of lessons from history, and from historians.

Historicizing Institutional Logics

Mutch's starting point is that the lists of societal logics proposed by Friedland and Alford (1991), and by Thornton, Ocasio, Lounsbury (2012), are not adequately grounded or justified. Mutch proposes a new list; drawing on the work of cultural historians – specifically, Huizinga and Freidson. His nine candidates are grounded in three sets of fundamental human needs, which he suggests are inevitably addressed through societal institutions, across time and across place. These logics vary in their details, but not in their existence. "What history demonstrates", to Mutch, "is not only the perennial nature of such responses [logics] but the complex and shifting nature of their manifestations in practice" (249). To us, however, it demonstrates something else.

To us, history demonstrates that different practices and values may bubble up to become 'societal'. We see no list of logics, inevitably manifested in different historical contexts. We see, instead, evolving inter-institutional systems; in which new societal logics may emerge, and in which some logics – however common elsewhere – may be absent. For example, we would

follow Foucault, and later historians of sexuality, in arguing that the Victorian period saw the emergence of sexuality as a societal logic (across several societies). Sexuality emerged as a distinct domain of life, characterized by specific practices and motivations, with sex and desire as principles of action and explanation (Foucault, 1990; Halperin, 2002). This logic took its place with other societal logics, such as the family, religion, medicine, law, and the state; interfering with their operations, and contesting their jurisdictions and authorities. Let us grant, just for a moment, that sexual needs are entirely ahistorical (cf. Foucault, 1990). It remains the case that these needs were not bundled into a societal logic until a certain point. Rather, they were integrated into other logics: the family (in its focus on dynastic reproduction), or dietetics (in its focus on the regulation of desire for food, exercise, *et cetera*).

The implication of this is that 'fundamental' needs, or responses to them, do not simply map to societal logics. Moreover, still granting that these needs are perennial, there is no reason that they would necessarily be addressed in the same way across a society. They might be addressed very differently, across locales. The emergence of an overarching societal logic is not a clear extrapolation from perennial needs, but is, rather, based in a dynamic of accretion, contestation, and sedimentation, and; through which local practices are fused into societal regularities, and a historically contingent inter-institutional system emerges (Ocasio, Mauskapf, & Steele, 2016).

We believe, thus, that institutionalists should historicize societal logics in a fundamentally different way. Mutch's paper makes the case clear. If societal logics are *not* rooted in responses to perennial needs, then to start with a list and look for manifestations is to start *in the wrong place*. As the 'conceptual history' school (e.g., Brunner, Conze, and Koselleck, 1972-1997) would say, we should start with historical specificities: the 'thick' social and conceptual struggles through which practices, symbols and logics are constructed and contested. We believe this is the

core of a truly 'historical' institutionalism (Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014): that specificities are not incidental to logics, that are rooted in enduring substances, but are the core materials from which logics arise, and substances emerge (Ocasio et al., 2016; Smets, Aristidou, & Whittington, 2017).

Realizing the Historicizing of Institutional Logics

Our approach has at least two concrete implications for the study of societal logics. First, the grounding of logics in fundamental needs suggests we should study 'manifestations' of the same logics, across time and space. In contrast, we call for a focus on the dynamics of practice and memory-making, through which differing numbers and groups of logics are constituted as societal (Ocasio et al., 2016). Second, the focus on fundamental needs implies, for Mutch, a coupling of tempos and levels: such that societal logics endure, and more localized logics do not. Our alternative approach makes no a prior judgement, leaving the durability of institutions an open question. These arguments are consonant with historical argumentation; and, to illustrate this, we introduce each in terms provided by the Annales School of historians.

First, then, the Annales School offers a sophisticated body of work on *mentalités*, which can be traced back to Bloch, one of the two founders (Bloch, 1924; Duby, 1973). *Mentalités* refer to the ways in which people make sense of, and engage, with the world; offering, perhaps, an analog to societal logics. Importantly, historians of *mentalités* seek to understand them 'from the inside' – recognizing their distinctiveness. We propose the same approach to societal logics: building our definitions from the bottom-up, rather than imposing them a priori. Specifically, we propose building our definitions through exploration of collective memory-making, where localized activities and practices are bound together into meaningful regularities; 'ways things are (and have been) done' (Ocasio et al., 2016). A focus on these dynamics not only forces us to attend to historical specificity, and to avoid a too-hasty articulation of societal logics, but also

foregrounds the role of power, history, and memories, in the constitution of these logics. As one historian of memory asserts (Confino, 1997: 1390), we should ask why "some pasts triumph while others fail" and why "people prefer one image of the past over another"; enabling some pasts to "steer emotions, motivate people to act [and become] socio-cultural mode[s] of action".

Second, the Annales School draws our attention to events. While Mutch briefly draws on the Annales School for Braudel's (1958) concept of *longue durée* (i.e., the deep stability of institutions at the societal level) in order to caution against using the term 'institutional change', he doesn't note that a younger generation of the Annales historians (e.g., Le Roy Ladurie, 1975) resurrected the importance of critical 'events'. While Mutch contends that at the societal level institutional arrangements fundamentally endure, Annales historians, and others, have shown that shifts in societal logics can be suddenly triggered by critical events; and that local arrangements can endure through tectonic societal reconfigurations. Our point is that societal logics do not, at least intrinsically, belong to a different order of temporality to more local logics. In our view, historicizing societal logics should entail studying their temporality, and its variability, rather than establishing an a priori pacing. Organization theory, in this respect, has much to offer. For example, Clemente, Durand, and Roulet (2017: 24) have proposed a model of change in which "critical events, such as natural catastrophes, accidents, political reforms, economic and financial crises, military conflicts, and trade agreements, raise questions about the value or appropriateness of a logic", which may motivate challenges, and, thus, "provoke institutional change". Although history should not be reduced to a mere sequence of events, the power of critical events to change historical trajectories should not be neglected either (Sewell, 2005).

Concluding Remarks

To sum up, we agree that institutional logics should be historicized; but are concerned at the

trajectory Mutch proposes. We believe societal logics should not be presupposed to reflect fundamental human needs, but that attention should be directed to their details; and the ways in which they emerge and change. This, we believe, will better do justice to the historical specificity of logics, enrich our societal analyses, and enhance our contextualization of more localized analyses. Our arguments resonate with work in history, including the Annales School; and engagement with this work enabled us to make two specific suggestions for an alternative 'historical institutionalism'.

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